Foreword

Anthony Lewis' *The Builders of Edinburgh's New Town, 1767-1795* breaks new ground – literally. Rather than concentrate, as others have done, on the origins and nature of James Craig's plan for the New Town, or the machinations of Edinburgh's political elite, or the nimbyism of early residents concerned for the amenity of their property investment, Lewis gets right down to basics. Who were the builders, masons, carpenters, and plasterers who actually built the New Town? Where did they acquire their skills? What previous experience did they have, and did they actually use drawings? What ingenuity did these and other tradesmen bring to their building sites? No longer will it be possible to write or talk glibly of Edinburgh's New Town as though it was some coherent, planned project. It was a messy, inconsistent, contested, speculative adventure heavily dependent on the pragmatism and skill of the tradesmen who trekked to the capital city to make a living and, just possibly, their reputation. Lewis shows, emphatically, that the concept and delivery of the New Town were two very different things.

Though New Town buildings broke new ground they were not entirely ground-breaking. Lewis reminds the reader of early- and mid-eighteenth century new streets in the adjacent burghs of Canongate, Portsburgh, Leith and Calton with their aristocratic houses and impressive public buildings, and indeed notes how advanced construction skills already were in these developments. And this is where Lewis' own skill is evident. He is able to make connections between the personnel. He shows, for example, how George Jameson, a mason or self styled 'carver', published a book – *Thirty Three Designs with the order of architecture according to Palladio* (1765) –which he advertised in the *Caledonian Mercury* and sold from his home at the head of Blackfriars' Wynd to a long list of building tradesmen active in Edinburgh's New Town between the 1760s and 1790s. With its scaled plans, drawings, and designs for storeys and stairs, as well as roofs and gables, George Jameson's book, Lewis demonstrates, informed much of the construction work undertaken in the New Town, and that such knowledge exchange, as we might nowadays term it, was also promoted by means of journeymen societies for painters, plasterers, joiners, wrights and glaziers.

Where Lewis adds particularly to the existing understanding of the development of the New Town is in his grasp of the building process. His knowledge is unrivalled in this area. He explains in detail how patrons engaged architects to design a property, who in turn engaged tradesmen – men such as William Christie, mason – who subcontracted the actual work to teams of journeymen. An overseer or foreman kept accounts of wages and materials, and assumed responsibility for the work-flow through the management of the various tradesmens' teams – a founder (for foundations), mason, wright, smith, slater, glazier, painter, plasterer, and a marble cutter for fireplaces.

While there were superstar architects, such as Sir William Chambers, Robert and James Adam and Robert Mylne, who have received considerable attention from authors for their commissioned work from notable patrons, amongst Lewis' most important contributions is his identification of the cadre of building tradesmen who built the New Town on their own account. He convincingly demonstrates how the Town Council's Chamberlain and Clerks showed prospective builders and developers Craig's New Town plan, and allowed them to select a plot which was then marked on the feuing plan by the

Overseer of Works. The arrangement was ultimately approved and recorded by the Town Council, and a price and annual feu duty, payable to the Council, fixed. To develop the plot did not require a plan to be presented; nor was a uniform elevation required. Indeed, 'Stormont' windows could whimsically burst out of the roof line; bow windows projected on to street alignments. Only invisible cellar supports and drain connections were a requirement. It was precisely this flexibility that was appealing to builders who had considerable freedom to develop plots on their own initiative and as they saw fit. Mansions, tenements, shops and factories were the result. An Act of 1768 allowed purchase money for plots and annual feu duties to be spread over ten years and these combined conditions enabled a multitude of tradesmen to become speculative builders. As has been argued elsewhere, it was commercial law not property law that governed the expansion of the New Town using the 'grammar of Scottish building', as Lewis terms it, to articulate form and function through conventional treatments of gables, stairs, and chimneys. Profits on commissions where these existed, deferred payments on purchase prices and feu-duties, 'expert' knowledge acquired through books and practical sub-contracting work, and forms of business organisation that emphasised networking and family connections meant the building bonanza that was the New Town was largely delivered by speculative builders. Lewis summarises the success of Edinburgh's builders as based on 'patrons, partners, professionalism, and productivity.'

Though builders were the 'dominant' force, Lewis argues, in developing the New Town and were highly respected by powerful individuals in the city, occasional events produced shock waves, undermined confidence, and disrupted construction work. The collapse of the Ayr Bank (1772), the actual collapse of the North Bridge (1769), and a long-running court case over the sale of feus on the south side of Princes Street unsettled builders in the early 1770s and produced an adverse impact on Town Council finances, already stretched in relation to money borrowed to buy and develop land from Heriot's trustees. Emboldened by rising sales of land in the 1780s the Council raised annual feu-duties substantially to improve not just their own cash flow but to favour the construction of houses rather than tenements, and through another Building Act, 1785 tried to tighten up on uncontrolled developments. Such awareness of the connection between the price of housing and the social tone of an area was an early recognition of residential segregation in the New Town.

What Anthony Lewis achieves in this book is to convey the buzz of the New Town – of people doing business. There is a sense of the 'shock of the new.' Builders were the heart of developments, and some were out to impress. As he observes: 'Successful builders' drawing rooms held design books and art and they wore clothes of flashing silk tartan waistcoats … gold rings, pocket watches and medallions, [and] silver snuff boxes shone to impress. They wore beaver fur hats and great coats for winter, and sparkling paste shoe buckles.' Money was spent on appearances, as account book entries for furniture and clothes confirm.

Builders also sought to impress in other ways. Clients were shown plans and projects laid out in booklets or folios that displayed their architectural competence. Contracts for elaborate designs and decorated interiors provided builders with access to the great and powerful of the city. Indeed, as Lewis

shows in his final chapter, the reputation of many builders preceded them as their successes with powerful Edinburgh figures led to contracts with prominent families elsewhere in Scotland. Yester, Thurston and Gosford houses in East Lothian, planned new towns (Fochabers), and fine homes for the new tobacco lords in Glasgow's burgeoning merchant city were among the properties constructed by Edinburgh builders with New Town credentials. Public buildings in Glasgow – the new Infirmary, Trades House, Corn Exchange and Assembly Rooms and many of the streets on which they stood – were the work of Robert and James Adam. By these means new construction practices were disseminated throughout Scotland. Encouraged by their successes within Edinburgh, builders became more muscular in their pursuit of business practices by acting collectively to protect their right to work, to resist a litigious Town Council, and to contest the restrictive trade practices attempted by the Society of Journeymen, ultimately by forming their own Society of Master Builders, Wrights and Masons.

For political reasons the Hanoverian royal family are commemorated in the principal New Town street names of Edinburgh as the capital of North Britain. But, as Lewis shows, the building tradesmen are also memorialised in the names of Chessel's Court, Alison Square, Brown Square, Young Street, and Hill Street and it is their skills that are fully recognised in this insightful and highly original study of the construction industry. The many builders' names and personalities introduced to us in this book are the hallmark of Anthony Lewis' empirically rich account of the building of the New Town. Edinburgh folk and students of urban development generally are deeply indebted to him for his meticulous research and penetrating insights into the building process in eighteenth century Edinburgh and beyond.

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Edinburgh, March 2014#